Do You Hear What I Hear?

Sarah Wolf

Amos 8:1-12

Luke 10:30-37

July 21, 2019

Today’s Old Testament reading comes from the book of Amos. We don’t typically spend a lot of time in Amos, or in many of the minor prophets for that matter. We are more familiar with Jeremiah or Isaiah, and we have all probably heard Micah 6:8 a time or two. But our lectionary has us diving into Amos this summer. As I did for my sermon on 1 Kings sermon, some background information will probably be helpful before we hear God’s word for us from Amos.

Amos was a little bit older than Isaiah, and so his prophetic writings are the oldest in the Old Testament. That’s pretty old.

The kingdom of Israel had been split into two kingdoms — Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Amos lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, but he *preached* in the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel was in the middle of an extended period of peace, with artistic and commercial development abounding. Everyone was prospering. All seemed well.

Enter Amos.

Amos enters the scene, and begins preaching his major themes of social justice, God’s omnipotence, and divine judgment. He emphasizes that God will hold Israel to the same standard that God holds every other nation, if not even to a higher standard. It is no wonder that Amos is eventually advised by a high priest to leave the country.

So, while everything may have *appeared* to be good in Israel, it clearly was not.

Which brings us to today’s lectionary passage. Against that backdrop, hear now these words from Amos chapter 8.

This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit.

He said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’

Then the Lord said to me,

‘The end has come upon my people Israel;

 I will never again pass them by.

The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day,’

says the Lord God;

‘the dead bodies shall be many,

 cast out in every place. Be silent!’

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,

 and bring to ruin the poor of the land,

saying, ‘When will the new moon be over

 so that we may sell grain;

and the sabbath,

 so that we may offer wheat for sale?

We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,

 and practice deceit with false balances,

buying the poor for silver

 and the needy for a pair of sandals,

 and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:

Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Shall not the land tremble on this account,

 and everyone mourn who lives in it,

and all of it rise like the Nile,

 and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?

On that day, says the Lord God,

 I will make the sun go down at noon,

 and darken the earth in broad daylight.

I will turn your feasts into mourning,

 and all your songs into lamentation;

I will bring sackcloth on all loins,

 and baldness on every head;

I will make it like the mourning for an only son,

 and the end of it like a bitter day.

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,

 when I will send a famine on the land;

not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,

 but of hearing the words of the Lord.

They shall wander from sea to sea,

 and from north to east;

they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord,

 but they shall not find it.

Our Gospel Text comes from Luke 10:30-37. This text follows a little bit from George’s texts from last week. In the Lukan version, a lawyer stands up to test Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. What follows is the famous, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ Then the lawyer continues to test Jesus by asking, “and who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

———

It probably comes as no surprise that when putting together the bulletin for today, our children’s Bibles did not have an illustrated story for the Amos passage. Bummer. No pictures of dead bodies or people in sackcloth or pictures of John Peterson-esque bald heads. Not even a picture of a basket of watermelon or mangoes.

And I don’t blame the editors of the children’s Bibles. This Amos text is pretty dismal. The God about whom Amos prophesies is not the God we are probably most comfortable with.

The God about whom Amos prophesies is not the God that the Israelites are comfortable with either, for that matter.

In an earlier prophecy, Amos tells the people that God is setting a plumb-line, like the kinds builders use to establish a straight, vertical line, as a means to see if Israel measures up. Turns out they don’t. They don’t measure up at all.

Today’s text explains…

“Hear this, you that trample on the needy,

and bring to ruin the poor of the land,

saying, “When will the new moon be over

so that we may sell grain;

and the sabbath,

so that we may offer wheat for sale?

We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,

and practice deceit with false balances,

buying the poor for silver

and the needy for a pair of sandals,

and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

What have the Israelites done?

There’s a reason for their time of plenty. There’s a reason why they’ve prospered. It’s because they’ve taken advantage of the poor and the needy. Amos tells them that they’ve not only taken advantage, they’ve *trampled* on them. It’s one thing to prosper in a good economy; it’s a whole different thing if you purposely bring someone down so as to ensure your prosperity.

Amos says that the merchants ask, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain? When will the Sabbath be over so that we may sell wheat?”

Sabbath is a day of rest, an invitation to enjoy a day of carefree living, of taking a break from the worry of the world. And yet the merchants cannot wait for the day of rest to be over, so that they may go back to work taking advantage of those around them. As one scholar puts it, “they are waiting for the day of sanctity to come to an end so that cheating and exploitation can be resumed.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Israel has indeed become a prosperous nation, but at the cost of the those who are already most at risk for being taken advantage of, at the cost of those on the margins of society, at the cost of those whom Israel has been charged with watching out for.

Sojourners, a magazine focusing on Christian social justice, put out a list of only *some* of the over 2000 verses in Scripture on poverty and justice. A quick look through it shows many of the verses coming from the Torah, which should have been the guiding law for the people of Israel.

From Leviticus:

You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.

and

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens.

From Deuteronomy:

There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.

and

Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

This is not new stuff that Amos is talking about. The call *not* to cheat your neighbor is *not* new. And yet the people of Israel have forgotten. They’ve forgotten what it was like to be slaves in Egypt, to be wanderers in the desert, and to be the first residents in a strange land.

And God has had enough.

What follows is a list of punishments from God that are terrifying.

“On that day, says the Lord God,

I will make the sun go down at noon,

and darken the earth in broad daylight.

I will turn your feasts into mourning,

and all your songs into lamentation;

I will bring sackcloth on all loins,

and baldness on every head;

I will make it like mourning for an only son,

and the end of it like a bitter day.”

God’s punishment sounds incredibly hard. The punishment will affect them in more ways than just financial. God’s punishment will be cosmic. God will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. There will be no escaping it.

And then God announces through Amos what is the scariest consequence of all — God’s silence.

Verse 11 says,

“The time is surely coming says the Lord God,

when I will send a famine on the land;

Not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,

but of hearing the words of the Lord.”

They shall wander from sea to sea,

and from north to east;

They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord,

But they shall not find it.”

In the end, as a result of their sinfulness, God will be silent. They will seek out God’s words, and they will never be able to find them.

This may feel like it’s too much. God’s silence is just too much of a punishment. Surely God would never abandon God’s people. And yet, here it is.

One way of looking at this list of punishments is that it’s rhetorical hyperbole. An extreme exaggeration. “I’m so hungry, I could eat a horse.” Amos turns to the most drastic punishment he can think of, to convince Israel to turn back toward God.

However, the hyperbole is also there for another reason. UVA professor Willis Jenkins points out that, “The intensifying images of doom can seem excessive, even vitriolic, but Amos’s hyperbole is not the mere dismissible ecstasy of outrage. Its excessiveness responds to the inescapability of a sinful political economy.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

That’s what Amos is getting at. That’s what *God* is getting at. The people of Israel have become so reliant on their system of prosperity-at-all-costs, that only the excess of God’s silence will be enough to startle them out of their sin.

Jenkins continues his analysis saying,

“Amos’s rhetoric aims to overwhelm, to suffocate, to cut off every avenue of religious escape. By doing so, it depicts how social evil has overwhelmed a people, suffocating them with distorted religious practices and exploitative political institutions that over time have cut off the possibility of hearing about God’s justice.”

Jenkins concludes by saying, “Life within an unjust social ecology can make it nearly impossible to hear God’s words.”

That’s where the people of Israel were. The unjust social ecology around them — the promotion of some at the cost of many — had made it nearly impossible to hear God’s words and only God’s silence would make them stop and pay attention.

I can’t help but hear this passage from Amos amidst the backdrop of what’s been going on in our country and in our world over the past few weeks and months and so I find myself asking a similar question —

Do *we* hear God’s words? Do we hear what God is saying to us today, in these words from ancient Scripture? Are we able to hear God’s call for justice amid the cacophony of the secular systems around us?

Do we hear this prophecy from Amos and think, “Yeah, those Israelites were bad dudes. They should have listened to God’s prophets. They should have read and followed Torah better”?

Or do we ask ourselves, “in what ways is our society *and my participation in it* making it nearly impossible to hear God’s words? In what ways am I in danger of not hearing God?”

Our Gospel reading for today is the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. We know this story well. It’s been told countless times. In fact, it has even spread into the secular world. How often do we turn on the news and catch that feel-good segment at the very end — you know the one…the quick story that tries to remind us that after all of the news stories of war and fighting and famine, that there are still moments of hope — how often does that story involve the phrase, “good Samaritan?” “Good Samaritan teenager helps elderly woman cross the street.” “Good Samaritan firefighter rescues kitten from tree.” This phrase is so familiar to us, that we’ve forgotten what it meant to those originally hearing this parable.

For the Jews listening to the parable for the first time, the shocking, subversive part of the parable was that it wasn’t the Jewish priest or the Jewish Levite who helped the Jewish man, but it was a Samaritan — an enemy of the Jews. A cultural pariah. That’s the shocking part.

The story of the Good Samaritan isn’t about just being nice to each other. It isn’t about helping to shovel the snow from your neighbor’s driveway. It’s about crossing boundaries — cultural, political, societal, —*regardless of the consequences—* to help someone in need.

Do we still hear this message today? Are we able to hear it? Or are we tempted to reduce it to a story that was only relevant for Jews and Samaritans? Are we willing to take a step back and ask who the Samaritans are for us today?

These words from Amos and from Luke aren’t just stories about something that happened to a group of people — the kingdom of Israel in 700 BCE or between a Samaritan and a Jew in the year 30 — and therefore have nothing to do with us. They are words that are meant for us today. We are still in similar systems that oppress and take advantage of the weak. We still need to hear prophets like Amos, calling us out on our sin, because God is probably frustrated with us, too.

Duke professor Will Willimon writes, “Amos represents and speaks for a God who loves Israel enough to call to account. Israel lives under the judgments of a God who loves Israel, who wants this people to be a ‘light to the nations.’ To show forth to the world what a people can do when they are owned by, accountable to, and called by a true and living God.” God is looking at Israel and saying to them, “I have called you. I love you.” And it is because of the *type* of love that God has, that Israel *has* to be held accountable.

This God who loves Israel enough to hold Israel accountable extends that same love and respect for us today. The promises that God made to Israel so long ago extend to us now. And so, the expectations that God had for Israel so long ago, are the same for us today.

Let anyone with ears listen!

All praise be to God.
Amen.

1. Abraham Heschel; “The Prophets” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Willis Jenkins; Feasting on the Word. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)